



# Research Brief

## Teachers' Emotional Consistency Matters for Preschool Children<sup>1</sup>

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This study examined teachers' emotional support in classrooms and how it relates to children's outcomes in preschool and kindergarten. Findings suggest that more consistent emotional support was related to better academic and social outcomes, emphasizing the potentially important role of consistency in children's school experiences.

Research indicates the ways teachers interact with children is critical in determining how children develop over time. One aspect of these interactions is the emotional support children experience in the classroom. Emotional support describes the emotional climate of the classroom as well as the ability of the teacher to sensitively respond to student needs. Many early childhood teachers would say that is the most important part of their job. The ability for teachers to provide an emotionally supportive environment is related to the development of children's social skills (e.g., increased social competence and reduced problem behaviors), as well as some academic outcomes.

Past research exploring emotional support has focused on the average levels of that support across the day and year. However, teachers are not perfectly consistent in the levels of support that they offer. This may be particularly true within a single day. If a teacher fluctuates in the amount of emotional support offered (i.e., the teacher is inconsistent), children may not feel as secure and may devote attention to monitoring their teachers' emotional cues instead of the lesson at hand. The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which teachers' consistent provision of emotional support was associated with children's achievement and social skills.

### The Study

Researchers used data from two studies conducted

by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) entitled the Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten (Multi-State) and the State-Wide Early Education Programs Study (SWEEP). The Multi-State Study included 6 states of 40 Pre-Kindergarten

### Emotional Support

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) was used to assess teachers' use of Emotional Support, including:

- *Positive Climate* (closeness, enthusiasm, and respect)
- *Negative Climate* (irritability, anger, or aggression)
- *Teacher Sensitivity* (support individual student needs)
- *Overcontrol* (rigid in approach to activities, without regard for student perspectives) - reversed

Average Emotional Support was calculated across these four dimensions and four observations within a day. Emotional Support Consistency was calculated as the reversed standard deviation of emotional support across the observations within a day.

<sup>1</sup>This research brief is based on the following published study: Curby, T.W., Brock, L., & Hamre, B. (2013). Teachers' emotional support consistency predicts children's achievement gains and social skills. *Early Education and Development*, 24, 292-309. doi:10.1080/10409289.2012.665760

sites in 2001-2002, and the SWEEP Study involved an additional 5 states with 100 sites in 2003-2004. A total of 694 classrooms were observed several (at least 4) times during a typical day using the CLASS observation instrument.

The CLASS provided average scores for Emotional Support in each classroom. Not only was the average used, but also the standard deviation (i.e., how much spread there was in the scores) was computed in Emotional Support across the day as a way to determine how much inconsistency there was in Emotional Support. The average levels of Emotional Support and the degree to which Emotional Support varied (i.e., Emotional Support Consistency) were used as predictors of children's outcomes.

The study included 2439 English-speaking children. Children completed a variety of assessments relating to achievement (e.g., receptive and expressive vocabulary, rhyming, letter naming, and early math) in preschool, and reports of their competence and problem behaviors were collected in kindergarten.

### Findings

Results indicated that Emotional Support Consistency was significantly related to children's academic and social outcomes, such that more consistency was related to better academic outcomes in prekindergarten as well as social outcomes in kindergarten.

Consistency was, in fact, a better predictor of children's outcomes than average levels of Emotional Support. This may be in part due to the fact that teachers who had higher levels of Emotional Support also tended to be consistent. However, Emotional Support Consistency predicted more child outcomes than Emotional Support averages.

### Implications

These results suggest that consistency is an important aspect of emotional support in the classroom and that greater understanding of consistency within a day may benefit both practitioners and researchers. Overall, these findings lend support to future observational work that captures teachers consistency as well as their average emotional support.

Greater attention may need to be given to pre-service training and professional development programs for early childhood teachers. It may be helpful to target key factors associated with greater emotional support variability (and less consistency). Emotionally consis-

tent classrooms may provide an atmosphere that is more conducive to learning because children know more of what to expect, can feel more secure, and can attend to learning tasks with fewer disruptions.

Other findings have suggested that stress may be one aspect of teachers' lives that could result in greater variability. Thus, attention should be given to ways to reduce teacher stress and support more consistent classroom functioning so that children might not have to navigate unpredictable teacher interactions. Refer to the **Additional Resources** for more information.

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### Additional Resources

Also see:

- Curby, T. W. & Chavez, C. (in press). Prioritizing interactions to support children's academic achievement. [Research-To-Practice Summary to accompany Curby & Chavez research article in same issue.] *NHSA Dialog: A Research to Practice Journal*.
- Zinsser, K., Bailey, C., Curby, T.W., Denham, S., Basset, H., & Morris, C. (in press). Exploring the predictable classroom: Preschool teacher stress, emotional supportiveness, and student's social-emotional behavior in private and Head Start centers. *NHSA Dialog: A Research to Practice Journal*.

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